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ABSTRACT

A review of school-reform literature reveals that the school principal is the key player in all successful reforms. The effective-schools movement recognized the importance of quality leadership by consistently identifying strong instructional leadership as instrumental in creating a school climate conducive to student success. This descriptive study endeavors to explore the demographics and career paths of rural principals in South Georgia to aid educators in understanding the principalship. A 21-item Career Path Survey and demographic questionnaire were mailed to all elementary, middle, and high school principals in the 41 South Georgia rural school districts served by Valdosta State University. The survey included questions that identified participants' educational and professional background and career goals. Of the 241 principals surveyed, 106 elected to participate, thus representing a 44 percent return rate. The findings of this study will assist in the development of profiles of rural South Georgia principals. Such profiles have the potential to inform decisions relating to the recruitment and training of rural school principals. By identifying the career paths and demographics of school principals, school districts and principal preparation programs can better respond to the needs of both preservice and inservice school leaders. An appendix contains a career-path questionnaire. (Contains 12 references.) (RT)

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WHO'S LEADING OUR SOUTH GEORGIA SCHOOLS?
A PROFILE OF PRINCIPALS

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Abstract

A review of the literature on school reform and restructuring reveals that the school principal is the key player in all successful reforms. The effective schools' movement recognized the importance of quality leadership by consistently identifying strong instructional leadership as instrumental in creating a school climate conducive to student success.

In order to add another dimension to educators' construction of understanding of the principalship, this descriptive study endeavors to explore the demographics and career paths of rural principals in South Georgia. A 21-item Career Path Survey and demographic questionnaire were mailed to all elementary, middle, and high school principals in the 41 South Georgia rural school districts served by our university. The survey included questions that identified participants' educational and professional background and career goals. Of the 241 principals surveyed, 106 elected to anonymously participate, thus representing a 44% return rate.

The findings of this study will assist in the development of profiles of rural South Georgia principals. Such profiles have the potential to inform decisions relating to the recruitment and training of rural school principals. By identifying the career paths and demographics of school principals, school districts and principal preparation programs can better respond to the needs of both preservice and inservice school leaders.

WHO'S LEADING OUR SOUTH GEORGIA SCHOOLS? A PROFILE OF PRINCIPALS

Introduction

A review of the literature on school reform and restructuring reveals the school principal is the key player in all successful reform efforts. In the first wave of reform efforts, A Nation at Risk (National Commission on Educational Excellence, 1983) specifically recommended strong leadership as a means for facilitating student achievement. The effective schools' movement recognized the importance of quality leadership by consistently identifying strong instructional leadership as instrumental in creating a school climate conducive to student success.

One may find lower performing schools with principals who are effective leaders; however, one would not find a successful school without an effective principal (Lezotte, 2001). Positive principal leadership is the catalyst for school improvement. As educators continue to restructure schools to better meet the needs of our ever-changing society, the principal's effective leadership practices become paramount as we enter a new generation of school accountability. The nature of the roles and responsibilities of the school principal has been the focus of a plethora of research (Blasé & Blasé, 1999; Beck & Murphy, 1993; Crow, 1993; Hallinger, 1992; Leithwood, 1992). In order to add another dimension to educators' construction of understanding of the principalship, this descriptive study endeavors to explore the demographics and career paths of

rural principals in South Georgia. More specifically, the following questions were addressed:

1. What is the demographic profile of the principal in rural South Georgia?
2. What are the teaching and curricular backgrounds of rural South Georgia principals?

The findings of this study will not only assist in the development of profiles of rural South Georgia principals but will have the potential to inform decisions relating to the recruitment and training of rural school principals. By identifying the demographics and career paths of school principals, school districts and principal preparation programs can better respond to the needs of both preservice and inservice school leaders.

Procedures

A 21-item Career Path Survey and demographic questionnaire was mailed to all 241 elementary, middle and high school principals in the 41 South Georgia rural school districts served by Valdosta State University. The survey was developed by a group of educational leadership professors and items were validated using an expert group composed of current and retired school administrators. The survey included questions that identified participants' educational and professional background and career goals (see Appendix).

The VSU service area can be described using the Georgia's Council for School Performance (1997) study that classifies districts into clusters according to free and reduced lunch rates, racial composition, size and tax base or wealth.

The majority of the districts served by VSU are from low SES or lower middle SES clusters with 55% of the students coming from low SES families and 51 -84 percent of the households qualifying for free and reduced lunch. The districts serve rural areas and small towns with student enrollments between two and ten thousand students (Livingston, 1998).

Of the 241 principals surveyed, 106 elected to participate, thus representing a 44% return rate. The participants consisted of 56 elementary, 24 middle, and 26 high school principals. According to Krejcie and Morgan (1970) this rate of return can be generalized with a .10 level of confidence. The results were analyzed and reported using measures of central tendency and frequency of responses.

Principal Profile

According to the aggregate data, a profile of a school principal in the Valdosta State University's rural, South Georgia service area tends to be that of a Caucasian male with an average age of 48, possessing an average of 11.67 years teaching experience combined with 13.23 years of administrative experience. From these statistics, we may infer that the average school administrator in rural South Georgia made the transition from classroom teaching to school leadership relatively close to the mid-point of his teaching career (assuming a standard 30 year career tenure) and that the average school administrator is approaching the anticipated end of his career in education.

Equally as significant is the implication that, in light of statistics from the 2000 Census, the composite school principal may not be demographically representative of the total system population, particularly in terms of race and gender. For example, census figures for the 41 county VSU service area indicate that African-Americans comprise 32.8% of the total population, yet occupy only 16.7% of the administrative positions in the school systems. Hispanics fare even worse proportionally as there are no Hispanic or Latino school principals in the service area despite the fact that this group accounts for 3.5% of the service area population and continues to grow. As for females, while a superficial examination would seem to imply that the percentage of female administrators (44.4%) comes closest to reflecting the demographic percentage of the service area as a whole (49.6%), women principals are still underrepresented in terms of the distribution of female principals among elementary, middle and secondary schools.

The dimensions surrounding the discrepancies between the demographic representation of the composite VSU service area principal as a white male and the diversity of the population he serves become clearer when viewed from the perspective of female and minority principal distribution rates in the area school systems. Arguably, the most glaring imbalances occur at the secondary level, where 6.3% of high school principalships are held by white females (currently, there are no African-American female secondary principals in the VSU service area). In contrast, 18% of female principals serve in middle schools and 73% of all women principals work in the elementary school setting. When the consideration of race is factored with gender, the data indicate that 8% of high

school principals in rural South Georgia are African-American males and 8.3% of middle school principals are African-American. The elementary principalship is also underrepresented by African American males. Moreover, while there were no African-American female secondary principals, they did occupy 6% of the middle school principalships and 12.5% of the elementary school principalships.

In terms of education and job experience, the profile indicates that a principal in the VSU service area is more likely to have obtained his first degree in secondary education-even if he occupies or has occupied an administrative position in an elementary or middle school. Additionally, the profile reveals that principals of elementary and secondary schools are more likely to have had prior experience in those grade levels than those administrators serving at the middle school level. However, almost one third of the elementary principals have had no elementary school experience.

Principals choosing to continue their education tend to be male, Caucasian principals at the secondary level. The majority of these principals opt to pursue doctorates of education in the field of Education Leadership with the ultimate goals of becoming either more successful/effective principals or attaining advancement to leadership roles on the system or state level.

Among those principals who aspire to the superintendency, the profile indicates that the typical candidate is a Caucasian male middle school principal with an average age of 44. As indicated in the general administrative profile, the composite candidate for superintendent obtained his first degree in secondary education, irrespective of subsequent administrative experience. As with the

previous observation regarding gender, race and overall demographic representation, the aspects of the administrative profile encompassing education, experience, and future goals seem to support the notion that leadership at the highest levels of the school systems is not representative of the constituency population base.

Summary and Conclusions

The results of this study of rural South Georgia principals practically mirror those reported fifteen years ago by Doud (1988). From a nationwide survey of K-8 principals sponsored by the National Association of Elementary Principals, Doud developed a profile of principals describing the typical principal as a Caucasian male, 47 years of age, with 11 years of teaching experience and 11 years of service as a principal. This basic profile was also corroborated by a later study of North Carolina principals in 1992 which also identified the principal as a 47.8 year old Caucasian, male with 22 years educational experience (North Carolina State Department of Public Instruction, 1992). Ironically, in-spite of radical changes in the nature of the principal's roles and requisite professional skills, the profile of today's principal remains unchanged.

The findings of this study have direct implications for the recruitment and training of future principals and professional growth opportunities for current principals. School districts and principal preparation programs must collaborate to improve our practices in each of these functions.

The data would seem to indicate the need for increased efforts in both the recruitment of minority administrators and a more equitable representation of females and minorities at all levels of K- 12 education leadership. School districts and universities must expand their strategies to recruit women and especially minorities into school leadership programs. These efforts must begin with teacher preparation and recruitment and extend to graduate school as the disparity of minority principals has its roots within the shortage of minority teachers, particularly in rural districts. Graduate programs in educational leadership should develop more innovative delivery systems such as off-campus cohort programs. Such programs bring graduate studies into the local community, thus increasing the accessibility to principal certification.

Due to the overwhelming numbers of elementary and middle school principals with secondary teaching experience and degrees, universities also have an obligation to review the curriculum of principal preparation programs. Coursework and supervised field experiences in such areas as reading instruction, early childhood development, and nature of the middle school student should be integrated into all educational leadership students' programs of studies.

It is imperative that principals have knowledge of the pedagogy and general content areas of the schools they are endeavoring to improve. This knowledge is essential to effectively coaching and evaluating teachers and facilitating school reform. Inevitably these concepts will also need to be a focus of professional development for inservice principals.

In summary, the insights discerned from this study may not be found solely in the profile of who IS the rural South Georgia principal, but more importantly, who IS NOT. Consequently, as we develop a deeper understanding of the school principalship we should endeavor to generate a praxis that enhances principals' grade level knowledge and leadership skills and encourages mentoring of minority and secondary female teacher leaders as future principals.

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APPENDIX

CAREER PATH QUESTIONNAIRE

Read each question or statement and complete and/or circle the letter of the response that pertains to you.

My School is a/an Elementary _____ Middle_____ Secondary _____
Grades _____ - ____

School Name:_____

County: _____

Your Age _____ Male _____ Female _____

Native American _____ Caucasian _____

African American _____ Hispanic _____ Other _____

Total Years as Teacher_____ Total Years as an Administrator _____

Current Position: _____

I plan to retire in _____ years.

Circle the letter of your response or complete the necessary statements.

1. **My first B.S. degree was in:**
   a. Secondary education – subject area: _____
   b. Elementary education
   c. Middle school education
   d. Special education
   e. Guidance and counseling
   f. Other (Specify):_____

2. **My first masters degree or add-on certification was in:**
   a. Secondary education-subject area: _____
   b. Elementary education
   c. Middle school education
   d. Special education
   e. Guidance and Counseling
   f. Leadership
   g. Other:_____

3. **My second masters degree or add-on certification was in:**
   a. Secondary education-subject area: _____
   b. Elementary education
   c. Middle school education
   e. Special education
   e. Guidance and Counseling
   f. Leadership
   g. Curriculum/Inst.
   h. Other:_____

4. My Ed.S. degree was in:

a. Secondary education-subject area: _____
b. Elementary education
c. Middle school education
d. Special education
e. Guidance and Counseling
f. Leadership
g. Curriculum/Inst.
h. Other:_____

5. My Ed.D./Ph.D. degree is in:

a. Secondary education-subject area: _____
b. Elementary education
c. Middle school education
d. Special education
e. Guidance and Counseling
f. Leadership
g. Curriculum/Inst.
h. Other:_____

6. I am presently engaged in a/an:

a. Masters degree in Ed. Leadership
b. Add-on certification for Leadership
c. Ed.S. in Educational Leadership
d. Ed.D in Educational Leadership
e. Ph.D in Educational Leadership
f. Other (Specify): _____
g. Not presently attending school

7. My first teaching assignment was:

a. Elementary School
b. Middle School- Subject area: ____
c. Secondary – Subject area:_____
d. Special Education
e. Guidance and counseling
f. Other (Specify): _____

8. My second teaching assignment was:

a. Elementary School
b. Middle School- Subject area:____
c. Secondary – Subject area:_____
d. Special Education
e. Guidance and counseling
f. Other (Specify): _____

9. My third teaching assignment was:

a. Elementary School
b. Middle School- Subject area: ____
c. Secondary – Subject area:_____
d. Special Education
e. Guidance and counseling
f. Other (Specify): _____

10. My fourth teaching assignment was:

a. Elementary School
b. Middle School- Subject area: ____
c. Secondary – Subject area:_____
d. Special Education
e. Guidance and counseling
f. Other (Specify): _____

11. Total number of years of teaching experience is:

___ Years Elementary school
_____ Years Middle school
___ Years High school
_____Years Other (Specify): _____

12. The first leadership position I held is/was:

a. Elementary Assist. Principal
b. Middle School Assist. Principal
c. Secondary Assist. Principal
d. Elementary Principal
e. Middle School Principal
f. Secondary Principal
g. Assist. Superintendent
h. Superintendent
i. Central Office Position (Specify):_____
j. Other (Specify): _____

13. This will be a terminal position for me:

a. Yes
b. No

14. The second leadership position I held is/was:

a. Elementary Assist. Principal
b. Middle School Assist. Principal
c. Secondary Assist. Principal
d. Elementary Principal
e. Middle School Principal
f. Secondary Principal
g. Assist. Superintendent
h. Superintendent
i. Central Office Position (Specify):_____
j. Other (Specify): _____

15. This will be a terminal position for me:

a. Yes
b. No

16. The third leadership position I held is/was:

a. Elementary Assist. Principal
b. Middle School Assist. Principal
c. Secondary Assist. Principal
d. Elementary Principal
e. Middle School Principal
f. Secondary Principal
g. Assist. Superintendent
h. Superintendent
i. Central Office Position (Specify):_____
j. Other (Specify): _____

17. This will be a terminal position for me:

a. Yes
b. No

18. The fourth leadership position I held is/was:

a. Elementary Assist. Principal
b. Middle School Assist. Principal
c. Secondary Assist. Principal
d. Elementary Principal
e. Middle School Principal
f. Secondary Principal
g. Assist. Superintendent
h. Superintendent
i. Central Office Position (Specify):_____
j. Other (Specify): _____

19. This will be a terminal position for me:

a. Yes
b. No

20. The fifth leadership position I held is/was:

a. Elementary Assist. Principal
b. Middle School Assist. Principal
c. Secondary Assist. Principal
d. Elementary Principal
e. Middle School Principal
f. Secondary Principal
g. Assist. Superintendent
h. Superintendent
i. Central Office Position (Specify):_____
j. Other (Specify): _____

21. My ultimate goal is to become a/an: _____

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